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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000229

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SUBJECT: TALABANI GIVES READOUT OF SYRIA VISIT, PASSES
MESSAGE FROM SULEIMANI

Classified By: Ambassador Khalilzad per 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Iraqi President Jalal Talabani told the Ambassador in a meeting on January 21 that Syria had agreed to cooperate in improving the stability and security of Iraq, but they needed improved trade relations as well. The Syrians told Talabani they also wanted to improve relations with the Shia and wanted to invite SCIRI leader Abdel Aziz al-Hakim to Damascus. Talabani said the next steps in their relationship included implementing the agreement between their respective Ministries of Interior on intelligence sharing and securing the border between the two countries. He said IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani had flown to Damascus to give Talabani a message for the Ambassador - that Iran is not targeting Americans and is ready to cooperate. Talabani and the Ambassador also discussed the way forward on the security dialogue with Iran and Syria and pressing domestic issues. END SUMMARY.

Trade Paramount for Syria

12. (C) Talabani said his meetings with the Syrians were very frank, and he claimed that they have opened a new chapter in their relations. According to Talabani, he took a different view than the Syrians on how to approach security and trade issues. The Chief of Syrian military intelligence Asef Shokat told Talabani he had orders to cooperate with Iraq, but he said Iraq and Syria need to improve trade relations and increased security cooperation will follow. He said once trade is increased the Syrians will be more committed to relations with Iraq. Talabani shared with the Syrians his view that security needed to come before cooperation on trade, oil, and all other issues.

Syria Wants Improved Shia Relations

13. (C) Talabani said Syria wants to improve its relationship with the Shia. They want to invite SCIRI leader Abdel Aziz al-Hakim and are willing to change their Shia policy. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad told Talabani that former Prime Minister Jafari never visited Syria when he was in power, but now has visited. According to Talabani, Jafari told the Syrians that the U.S. refused to let them come, and that PM Maliki is now using the U.S. as an excuse not to visit them. He also said the Syrians are against the Saudis funding Iraqi opposition figures like Salih Mutlaq, Khalaf Ulayan, and other groups and they also want to invite Barzani.

MOI Agreement, Border Problem, Dialogue

¶4. (C) Talabani said the next steps in Iraq's relationship with Syria await changes in Syrian media. He said the Iraqi and Syrian Ministries of Interior signed an agreement on exchanging information on terrorists and other criminals. The Syrians told Talabani that he should work on fixing the de-Ba'athification process.

¶5. (C) Syria agreed to fight the border problem, but they told Talabani that there are three sources that facilitate border crossings that they must deal with: Islamist groups inside Syria, people on the border such as tribes taking money, and corrupt people within the Syrian government.

¶6. (C) Talabani told the Ambassador that Assad asked Talabani to relay to the U.S. that his policy was the policy of his father, Hafez al-Assad. He said Syria is ready to have a dialogue with Israel and they are ready to come to Washington if they get an invitation letter. Bashar said Syria is ready to discuss all issues of concern with the U.S. -- including Lebanon and Iran. He emphasized that Syria was an Arab country, signaling Talabani's willingness to downgrade relations with Iran in exchange for improved relations with the U.S. Talabani saw this as an opportunity. Talabani suggested holding a bilateral meeting between Syria and Iraq on securing the border with the U.S. present as advisor to Iraq.

Other Atmospherics

¶7. (C) Talabani had a meeting with Syrian parliamentarians. He said the Iraqi delegation conducted themselves appropriately except Salaam Jumaili, a member of the Iraqi

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Islamic Party, who said at a meeting with Syrian Ba'athists that if he was Syrian he would go to Iraq to fight the U.S.

¶8. (C) The Syrians told Talabani that the Syrian street was upset about the circumstances surrounding the execution of Saddam. They said Maliki should not have gone on television to sign the execution order (it looked like revenge) and it should not have occurred on the Eid holiday.

Suleimani Message

¶9. (S) According to Talabani, IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani visited him in Syria to pass a message for the Ambassador. Suleimani told Talabani the U.S. and Iran have common interests in Iraq and are both working for success and security and against the terrorists; he said "I swear on the grave of Khomeini I haven't authorized a bullet against the U.S." He admitted to having hundreds of agents in Iraq at his disposal but denied ever using them against U.S. forces. He told Talabani he is ready to cooperate directly or indirectly through the Iraqi authorities. He said he wants the new Iraq strategy to be successful. He admitted that the Iranians captured in Erbil were members of Pastaran but denied that they were Quds Force. He also admitted that they were targeting the British. Talabani admonished him to stop attacking the Brits, and Suleimani agreed to return to Iran to discuss it with Khamenei.

¶10. (S) Suleimani told Talabani that Iran is ready to have a dialogue with the U.S. on Iraq security. He said they could assist with Baghdad security, security in the south, and the militias. He told Talabani they would try to stop the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia, and support Prime Minister Maliki against them. He said the dialogue could happen in one of three ways: messages through Talabani, a bilateral meeting (U.S.-Iran), or an Iraq-Iran bilateral with the U.S. present in an advisory capacity. (Note: General Casey

and the Ambassador will cable to Washington a proposed response strategy. End note.).

Domestic Issues

¶11. (C) The Ambassador urged Talabani to help reach agreement on the Hydrocarbons law, the de-Ba'athification law and work on a "virtual" moderate front. The Ambassador and Talabani then discussed what sort of reconciliation plan would reduce the violence in Iraq. Talabani said the South African experience provides good lessons for Iraq.
KHALILZAD